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ABSTRACT

In this paper, a brief history of the Navajo written language between 1819 and the present is presented. The paper describes the progress of Navajo as a written language. The history was used as background material for a meeting organized by the Sanostee-Toadlena Navajo Bilingual Education Project. The meeting's purpose was to survey the present situation of written Navajo and to look at the needs for new material to help Navajo children to learn to read their own language in the first grades. An abstract of "Some Aspects of Navajo Orthography," a dissertation by Dr. Wayne Holm, Director of Rock Point School, is appended. A related document is ED 043 413. (NQ)

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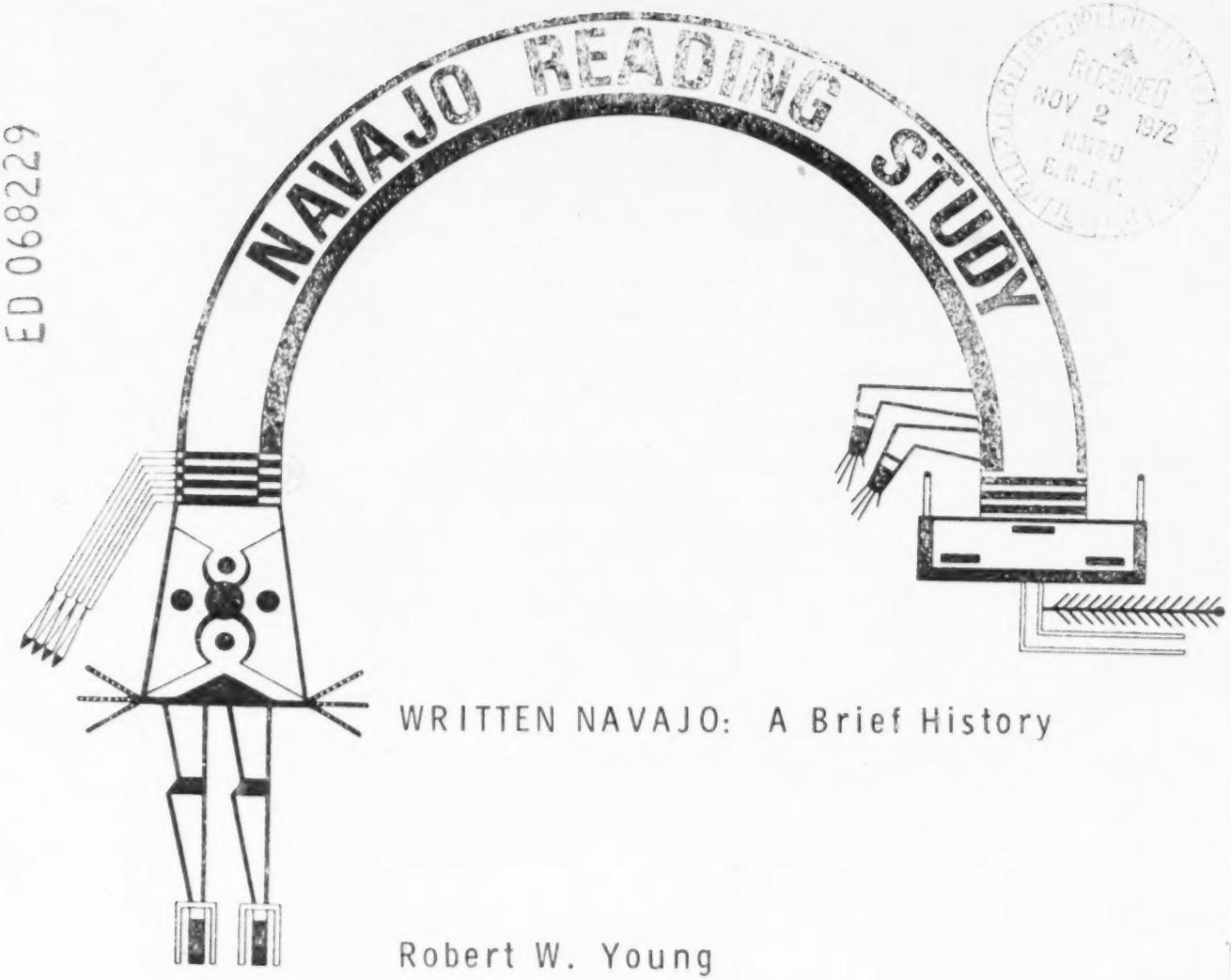

WRITTEN NAVAJO: A Brief History

Robert W. Young

Navajo Reading Study Progress Report No. 19
The University of New Mexico, October 1972

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The University of New Mexico

Navajo Reading Study

Principal Investigators: Bernard Spolsky
Robert W. Young

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Preface

The account that follows was written as background for a meeting organized by the Sanostee-Toadlena Navajo Bilingual Education Project. The purpose of the meeting was to survey the present situation of written Navajo, and to look particularly at the needs for new material if Navajo children are to learn to read their own language in the first grades. It is most fitting that this account should be written by Robert Young who has himself played such an important role in the activities described. Detailed bibliographical references to works mentioned in this paper can be found in Progress Report No. 7, Analytical Bibliography of Navajo Reading Materials (also published as BIA Curriculum Bulletin No. 10, 1970).

As an appendix to this report, we print an abstract of a dissertation written by Wayne Holm. Dr. Holm, director of Rock Point Schook, was assistant director of the Reading Study from 1970-2. The dissertation is entered in Dissertation Abstracts.

Bernard Spolsky

Written Navajo

On March 3, 1819, Congress enacted a public law providing for the establishment of a "Civilization Fund" ($10,000) designed for the introduction, among the Indians, of "the habits and arts of civilization." This was a forerunner of Federal Indian Education and the policies that guided it through the 19th century and through the first quarter of the 20th century--policies that emphasized acculturation and integration of Indians into the body politic of the nation.

The fruitless effort to stamp out Indian languages and cultural systems finally came to a close on the heels of the Meriam Survey, conducted during the period 1926-28 by the Institute for Government Research. The report of the Meriam Committee (entitled The Problem of Indian Administration) recommended sweeping changes in Federal Indian policy and in the programs carried on by the Federal Government, including greater involvement of the Indian communities themselves in determining local needs and finding solutions to social and economic problems. Emphasis shifted sharply away from "de-Indianization" following the appointment of John Collier as Commissioner of Indian Affairs, in 1933, and thereafter Indian languages and tribal cultural systems assumed a new status.

Prerequisite to effective involvement of such Indian communities as the Navajo in social and economic programming was the development of improved media for communications

among tribal members, involving not only the fostering of tribal governmental organizations, but the use of other available tools, including Indian languages.

Accordingly, shortly after 1935, and especially after the appointment of Willard W. Beatty as Director of Indian Education, the Bureau of Indian Affairs took the first tentative steps in the direction of utilizing Indian languages in written form.

Navajo had been written by anthropologists, linguists and missionaries for many years, in a variety of orthographies, for academic and religious purposes. Washington Matthews, the post surgeon at Fort Wingate in the 1880's collected many Navajo texts and, with the establishment of Navajo missions near the end of the 19th century, missionaries turned their attention to the Navajo language. The Franciscans published an Ethnological Dictionary of the Navajo Language in 1910 and a Vocabulary of the Navajo Language two years later, as well as catechisims and other religious material. In 1926, St. Michaels published a Manual of Navajo Grammar, and in the 1940's, a series entitled Learning Navajo. In addition, during the first three decades of the present century, various Protestant missions published religious materials and, in 1910, a small phrase book entitled Dine Bizād, written by G. F. Mitchell.

In the mid-1930's Gladys Reichard carried on a series of classes, at Ganado, Arizona, to demonstrate the feasibility

of teaching Navajos to read and write in their own language, utilizing her system of transcription. At about the same time Fr. Berard Haile of St. Michaels Mission was retained by the Bureau of Indian Affairs to prepare Navajo texts for broadcast over a Navajo language radio station that had been established at Window Rock. By that time, Fr. Berard was using an adaptation of the alphabetic system developed by Dr. Sapir.

Interest in writing Navajo was widespread, but each interest group was adamant in declining to abandon its own system for that of a competitor. Consequently, about 1936, Dr. Beatty turned to the Smithsonian Institution for expertise in resolving the problem of establishing an independent system for the transcription of Navajo. Dr. John P. Harrington, a linguist in the Bureau of American Ethnology, was assigned the task of working out a simple, practical alphabet, and producing primer material for use in teaching written Navajo. However, although Harrington was an excellent phonetician, he had little previous experience in working with Athapaskan languages.

In 1937, through the School of American Research in Santa Fe, Harrington was placed in contact with Robert W. Young who was then involved in field work on Navajo. Young was working with Adolph D. Bitanny, one of Gladys Reichard's students, in Albuquerque. In the fall of the same year Young went to Fort Wingate, New Mexico, where he continued language work with William Morgan. As a result of joint effort, Harrington,

Young and Morgan developed an orthography acceptable to Bureau educators and produced several primers and work books--among them a reader entitled Shash Yáázh. These earliest efforts at materials production were never published and disposition of the manuscripts is unknown.

In 1935 an interpreters' school was held at Fort Defiance, Arizona which resulted in a list of anatomical and medical terms, written in Navajo, and later published in mimeographed form under the title Navajo Medical Dictionary.

In the spring of 1940, Edward A. Kennard and Robert W. Young were employed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs to produce reading and teaching materials in Navajo and other Indian languages, and to introduce literacy in native languages in the schools. Adolph Bitanny was retained, by Navajo Agency, as a teacher of literacy, and Willetto Antonio was employed, at the Phoenix Indian School, as a printer.

A series by J. B. Enochs, consisting of a pre-primer, primer and reader, was translated into Navajo and published in 1940, under the title Little Man's Family. It was followed by a reader entitled Who Wants To Be a Prairie Dog, written by Ann Nolan Clark.

In 1941 William Morgan joined the literacy group, and Dr. Kennard turned his attention to Sioux and Hopi. There was an urgent need for reading material and, in 1941, Young

and Morgan produced a book, in mimeographed form, entitled The World and its People, in Navajo and English, with a glossary. This was followed by a four-volume series by Ann Nolan Clark, published bilingually in 1940-43, under the title Little Herder (in Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter).

In 1942, a new set of bilingual reading materials (Pre-primer, Primer and Coyote Tales) were prepared by Hildegard Thompson, based on Navajo stories and published as The Navajo Series.

In 1943 Young and Morgan published The Navajo Language, and an account of the events leading up to World War II. The latter was a Navajo Translation of War with the Axis, by Charles McFarlane. The Navajo version was entitled Díí K'ad Anaa'ígíí Baa Hane'. Additional teaching materials were produced, including a bilingual description of the Navajo alphabet, entitled The A B C of Navajo, republished in 1946 to include an abridged version of Robinson Crusoe, complete with glossary. The translation had been completed, about 1942, by Alice Gorman. And, in the same year, 1943, Young and Morgan began the publication of a monthly Navajo language newspaper called Ádahooníłígíí.

At the same period the Wycliffe Bible Translators, in Farmington, New Mexico began the translation of the Bible into Navajo. The Wycliffe Translators decided to use the "government" system of transcription in their work.

Interested in teaching literacy as well they produced primers and teaching materials that were published by the Bureau of Indian Affairs and made available generally to schools and literacy classes.

Following the close of World War II, the Navajo newspaper was continued and enlarged. The Gallup Independent gave used cartoon matrices for publication, with Navajo legends, in Ádahoonízíígíí, and an English summary of each article was added.

The post war period was fraught with many economic problems on the Reservation and interest grew in devising and carrying out a resources development plan. The evaluation of resource potential, as presented to the Tribal Council, was translated into Navajo, published in Ádahoonízíígíí and republished in reprint form for continuing distribution, in 1947. At the same time, to satisfy popular curiosity, the Navajo Treaty of 1868 was translated and published.

During the period 1947-50, the Tribal government was under heavy pressure from the Secretary of the Interior to revise the existing grazing regulations for the Navajo Reservation, or to adopt the General Grazing Regulations of the Department of the Interior. Complex and legalistic as they were, people in the communities could not understand the provisions of these documents, nor could interpreters explain them satisfactorily on an extemporaneous basis. They were translated into written Navajo, published in the Navajo newspaper and in

reprint form, and widely used as the basis for discussions at a community level throughout the Navajo Country.

At the same time the Navajo-Hopi Rehabilitation Bill was in the process of drafting by Congress. It too was translated, with explanations of each section, and published in Navajo.

A number of Navajo leaders and old people recorded historical narratives on Soundscriber disks, for transcription and publication in the newspaper. Of these, the best were subsequently assembled and republished in The Navajo Historical Series, including three separate books. In republished form, they became available during the period 1949-52 (The Ramah Navajos, The Trouble at Round Rock and Selections from Navajo History.) In 1948 Young and Morgan published a document entitled The Function and Signification of Certain Navajo Particles and, in 1951 a supplement to The Navajo Language was published, under the title Vocabulary of Colloquial Navajo. In 1950, a Navajo translation of the Revised Election Procedure for the Tribal Council was made available to the Navajo public.

During the early 1950's adult literacy classes were continued, by the Bureau of Indian Affairs and by mission groups, and the Bureau continued to cooperate with the Wycliffe Bible Translators in the production of primers, charts and teaching materials. These included a new series composed of a preprimer, primer and reader, a brochure on how to find a job (Naanish Hanishta), and a book on learning English, all authored by the Wycliffe Translators.

In 1953 a description of the Special Five Year Program (an accelerated educational program for Navajo young people whose education had been interrupted by the war or who for other reasons had not progressed far in school), was published. In 1956 a new set of bilingual materials by Cecil S. King and Marian Nez was published under the title Navajo New World Readers, and in 1958 Wall and Morgan published a Navajo-English Dictionary.

Finally, in 1957, in the face of great stress on the teaching and learning of English, the publication of Ádahooniłígíí was discontinued, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs turned its attention away from the use of written Navajo.

In the 1960's however, many young Navajos awakened to th realization that knowledge of the Tribal language and cultural heritage--and with it their identity as Navajos--were rapidly slipping away. This realization, often voiced by young people at Tribal Youth Conferences in the early years of the decade, led to a reawakening of interest in the Navajo language and the traditional culture. Since that time the Rough Rock Demonstration School, the Navajo Community College, the Navajo Reading Study, the University of New Mexico and Northern Arizona University have taken an active interest in the study of Navajo language and culture, and in the promotion of written Navajo. New reading materials are being produced, in Navajo, and bilingual education is once again finding support in the Reservation schools.

Some Aspects of Navajo Orthography

Wayne Stanley Holm, Ph.D.
Department of Educational Foundations
The University of New Mexico, 1972

Abstract

Navajo has been written, in various forms, for more than a century, but practical orthographies have been available for less than fifty years.

Navajo literacy programs have been conducted in the past by various interest groups, but the current effort differs from its predecessors in that it has the support of a growing number of young Navajo educators. Vowel length, tone, and nasality are phonemic in Navajo. The current practical orthography makes use of doubled vowels to mark length, an acute accent to mark high tone, and a cedilla or "nasal hook" to mark nasality. The orthography makes it fairly easy for native speakers to learn to read Navajo; but the diacritical markings pose a problem in learning to write the language.

Phonemic transcription systems and practical orthographies do not always coincide in form. Phonemic transcription systems may be designed to represent speech sounds in greater detail than is required by native speakers. Practical orthographies may reflect not only linguistic "reality" but also sociopolitical, psychological, pedagogical, and typographic-economic "realities."

Tests have shown that native speakers find it easier to read than to transcribe comparable material and the diacritics cause a disproportionate amount of difficulty in such transcription. Studies of diacritic frequency show that the marked member of each feature (long

duration, high tone, nasal cavity) is relatively less frequent than the unmarked member.

A review of the literature suggests that any phonemic contrast can be omitted in a practical orthography, including length, tone and nasality. A study of older Athapaskan syllabaries shows that languages with vowel systems very like that of Navajo have been written (and read?) without indication of length, tone or nasality. In fact, Stanley's study of Navajo verb morphophonemics insists that vowel length, tone, and nasality are predictable from the underlying lexical representation.

Attempts to find out what would happen if diacritics were eliminated in part or in whole suggest that while the elimination of all diacritics might result in a large number of homographs, the percentage of potential homographic pairs would still be relatively small. Experiments with adult readers would seem to indicate that accomplished readers are able to read less marked, and even unmarked, text.

Thus, while no one of these lines of evidence is in and of itself conclusive, taken together they suggest the possibility that native speakers can write and read Navajo text, even without the graphic representation of vowel length in which prosodic features are unmarked. Perhaps the most attractive possibility at this time would be the continued use of fully marked text for children, with experimentation in less-marked or unmarked text for adults. The ultimate test will be that of acceptance--or rejection--of such an orthography by Navajo decision-makers.